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Should Professional Engineers Have a Union?

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*(This is an essay written for initiation into Tau Beta Pi.
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Should professional engineers have a union? This question asks for no mere rhetorical discussion to be given casual thought and then dismissed from one's mind. It is a question so powerful in its implications that unless every engineer worthy of the name considers it soon, the economic and social position of the engineer will be no better than that of a skilled machinist if, in truth, it is any better now. By this is meant that his money income will be no higher than the machinist's, and society as a whole will not consider him any more important than the skilled worker. Consider the fact that the engineer must spend at least four years of intensive training in highly technical subjects, during which time he pays out money instead of being paid, and then, for the most part, takes a job which in pay, at least, is barely above the plane of the so called skilled worker. This worker has spent his four years learning a trade and has been paid for learning at that. This condition is hardly conducive to encouraging one into the engineering field, except for the sheer joy of engineering work.

This situation is almost universally recognized, but many say it is due to the nature of engineering in that there is little difference in the services of one engineer over another. One has as much right to claim that, as to say that, neglecting exceptional cases, there is no difference between the services offered by one doctor and those offered by another. One doctor can take out one's tonsils as well as another if one engineer can design a bridge or radio circuit as well as another. Doctors, however, are considered as possessing unique skills, why not engineers? It is time that it was recognized that engineers do not derive as many benefits from their training as they might, and it is time that something was done about it.

The idea of a union for engineers does not appeal to many members of the profession. They are not to be blamed for this. Engineers by nature dislike organized regimentation. They have been taught in their training to admire originality and independence of thought and action. Therefore, for the large majority, the

unionization of engineers will be a bitter pill to swallow.

When asked of the advisability of a union most engineers at first reply that they see no need for one. This is no doubt due to the common ideas of unions. They only think of unions being used to prevent starvation wages and excessive hours of work. Since the engineer is generally paid a living wage and has good working conditions the members of the profession think that a union could not give them anything which they do not already have. It is to be pointed out, however, that a union correctly organized and administered by engineers could overcome the above cited case involving the engineer's earning power. Since this union would consist only of professional engineers, they would be distinguished from that great band of technicians and mechanics who choose to call themselves engineers. In this manner the social prestige of an engineer would approach nearer that of the other professions. This union could be used in the usual manner to obtain for the engineer salaries more nearly remunerative for the amount of time spent in preparation for the profession.

A strong argument against the unionization of engineering is that unions belong to the laboring classes and that it is unheard of for professional people to have them. Consider a few of the other professions. The outstanding one is the medical profession. Have they a union? In the strict sense of the word, no. They have no need for one because of one important point that must be fully recognized by engineers. A doctor is by nature an individual. The majority of doctors establish their own practice under their own management, that is, they work for themselves. One who works for himself certainly needs no means, such as a union, to coerce his employer. Yet even with the highly individual characteristic of the doctor considered, he is not unorganized. The American Medical Association keeps up the high standards of the profession and applies suitable pressure to secure advantages for the doctors. The lawyers have

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the same characteristics of employment as the doctors. They, too, work for themselves but the State Bar Associations watch over and protect the lawyers. It can be seen that these professions are different from the engineering profession in that, usually, engineers work for others and are directly dependent on others for their income. It is in a case like this that a union is useful.

Possibly the best thing for engineers would not be a union, but something closely resembling one. The road to unionization will not be an easy one from all indications. There seems to be little demand from practicing engineers, by nature conservative, for one. There is only a faint realization of the need for one by those in school. Possibly the engineer is too proud to admit that he can not face all the problems of employment without help. With the greater tendency toward lengthened curricula in the colleges and universities the graduate of the longer course will certainly demand a better reason for having spent his time in such activity than he is now given. It seems ironical indeed, that the group which, on campus, is the most unified with respect to comradeship, should be the most disunified in the field.
